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Freelance writer

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HAND TO GOD *** ENSEMBLE STUDIO THEATRE

Religion plays a very different role in *Hand To God*, a wicked comedy by Robert Askins that opened the same weekend as the syrupy sweet *Godspell*. In this show, Margery (Geneva Carr), a lonely widow, leads her son Jason (Steven Boyer) and two other high schoolers in a class on Christian puppetry. They plan to use hand-puppets to tell parables, educate little kids and win people over to Jesus. But Kukla, Fran & Ollie this isn't: Jason's hand-puppet Tyrone is a foul-mouthed little bugger and may be possessed by the Devil.

The show gleefully dives into black comedy. Margery politely rejects the limp dating/marriage proposal from Pastor Greg (Scott Sowers). But when the dumb-witted student Timothy (Bobby Moreno) declares his lust, the frustrated, angry, seething and yes sexually hungry Margery is soon urging the teen to smash and destroy the classroom they're in before she straddles him on the ground and proves a vocally dominating mistress. Meanwhile, Jason tries to reach out to the geekily cool Jessica (Megan Hill) but his hand-puppet Tyrone soon interjects every filthy thought Jason has ever had about her and a weirded-out Jessica takes off.

This over the top comedy takes a turn for the serious in the second act. Margery is a genuinely unhappy woman who hasn't recovered from the death of her husband. (Mind you, that doesn't stop her from grinding the heel of her shoes into Timothy's crotch when she's a mind to.) And Jason may not have a

possessed hand-puppet or even be possessed himself but just a teenager who misses his dad and feels the weight of having to be everything to his mother.

Director Moritz von Stuelpnagel handles the transition from wild humor to genuine emotion with ease. In the tiny confines of EST, the sets by Rebecca Lord-Surratt, costumes by Sydney Maresca, lighting by Matthew Richards, and sound by Chris Barlow all make the most out of modest means.

Above all, the cast sinks their teeth into these roles with conviction. Carr is especially funny and focused as the confused and lost Margery. Moreno makes the most of the one-note lunkhead Timothy by keeping his appetites simple. Sowers is a good pushover. Hill shows an appealing strength as Jessica. And Boyer is marvelous as the confused Jason. He spends much of the show playing both himself and his hand-puppet Tyrone, arguing with himself, wrestling with himself, pleading with himself and always keeping the vulnerability of Jason front and center even as Tyrone is unleashing his wrath. It's a very funny, committed turn.

He and the rest of the cast are why this show gets a generous three stars out of four. The play is original but flawed, though refinement should make it better with relative ease. First, Askins needs to cut the prologue and epilogue in which Tyrone holds forth on religion and original sin and how people should outgrow the need for faith but probably won't. It's blunt and uninteresting and Askins should show more faith that the play will make the points he spells out so directly in these unnecessary bookends. Second, Jessica shows pluck right from the start when facing down the boorish Timothy, so why doesn't she show more pluck when dealing with Tyrone? Given her later actions, it would make sense for her not to be cowed so easily but give as good as she gets. It's also a little confusing to have Timothy curse so crudely right from the start in front of the pastor and Margery; surely they'd send him home for doing so even in the wacky world the show takes place in.

Finally, they might fine-tune the finale of *Hand To God*. Just as the show has earned the right to take Jason's pain seriously, it reverts to some easy humor with horror-movie cliches. Then it has Jason seem even more disturbed than ever. The human connection between he and Jessica seems like his salvation, so why not let that be key at the end, rather than resorting to a hammer and brute force to drive out Tyrone, which makes Jason truly disturbed and ready for hospitalization. All of this would turn a show with a strong cast and fresh premise into a genuinely rich and consistent work.

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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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